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Secret Cables Hint Torture Of Taiwanese

There is no longer any doubt about it. Chen Wen-cheng was viciously tortured on a recent visit to his native Taiwan. The episode ended in his violent death.

The fate of Chen Wen-cheng has become the subject of secret communications between Washington and Taipei. Underlying the exchange of cables is a quiet outrage over the brutal treatment of this inoffensive professor.

Chen had come to America as a graduate student and was teaching at Carnegie-Mellon University. He was a young man, just 31 years old, with a sense of dignity.

He had gone back to his homeland for a happy visit to show his infant son to his family. He was picked up by the Taiwanese authorities and interrogated for 13 hours. A few hours later, his battered body was found on the pavement beneath the fire escape of a high-rise building.

The official Taiwanese version of Chen's death was that it must have been either suicide or an accident. His friends think he was either pushed off the building or died under torture, his body perhaps

dumped from the building in a clumsy attempt to simulate suicide or accident.

Both the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency have been investigating Chen's death. Some of the secret findings tend to corroborate the darkest suspicions of his friends.

In one cable from Taipei, an American diplomat informed the State Department that he had openly expressed his doubts to Taiwanese officials about their account of what happened to Chen. He told the Taiwanese that he was troubled over the relationship of "Chen's 13-hour interrogation by the security police to his death which took place, at the latest, a few hours after that interrogation."

The language is even less diplomatic in a confidential State Department memorandum obtained by my associate Lucette Lagnado. "There is ample reason to be critically skeptical of the prosecutor's report on Professor Chen's death," the memo states.

Noting that one important Taiwanese source "believes Chen may have been murdered," the memo adds: "The generally shaky versions of Chen's interrogation and subsequent release from custody, disseminated by the authorities, together with the substantial inconsistencies in some of the authoritative stories, lead us to share these misgivings."

What were these inconsistencies

that have led American officials to suspect foul play? A confidential cable to the State Department from U.S. officials in Taipei lists some of them:

- Nongovernment experts who examined Chen's body found "many injuries, obvious even to laymen, which are not explained by a fall." In particular, the cable says, these outside experts "believe that Chen was tortured by a variety of means, including needles inserted in sensitive areas." They noted such suspicious injuries as small lesions under the fingernails and on the left wrist, and four puncture wounds in the kidneys—none of which, they believe, would be caused by a fall from a building, accidental or otherwise.

- "Once it is established that at some point prior to death Chen was subjected to torture, it is difficult then to argue that he would go to the top of a fire escape, get dizzy and fall off," the cable states. Yet that is the theory offered by the Taiwanese authorities when confronted with the even greater absurdity of their suggestion that the new father committed suicide.

- Chen's interrogators claimed to have shared meals with him during his prolonged questioning. The authorities also say Chen had dinner with a friend after the interrogation. Yet the official autopsy showed Chen's stomach was empty.

These are just a few of the doubts raised by the U.S. investigations.